



Regional planning agency says racial inequities holding Chicago back: 'We simply can't afford to keep players on the sidelines'

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Mary Wisniewski

 Unequal access to economic opportunities is holding the Chicago area back, a planning agency said Wednesday.

The Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning's "On to 2050" plan, approved by its board on Wednesday, called for investment in the Chicago-area's infrastructure that would give residents of all races and economic levels access to jobs, transportation and education.

"We simply can't afford to keep players on the sidelines," said CMAP Executive Director Joseph Szabo.

Projects like the proposed extension of the CTA Red Line south from 95th Street to 130th Street, which would provide a faster transit option for residents in mostly African-American neighborhoods on Chicago's far South Side, can help improve access to jobs. CMAP has recommended federal funding for the project.

John Hatcher, Jr., 16, of Sauk Village, a junior at Marian Catholic Academy and an African-American, said at the "On to 2050" launch event at Millennium Park that the problem of inequitable investment "affects us all."

"When we write someone off because of the color of their skin or their socioeconomic status, we waste the potential of people like me," said Hatcher, who was interviewed by CMAP for its earlier plan when he was younger. "And when we don't ensure that every community is thriving, we squander our potential as a region."

The "On to 2050" plan also emphasized the need to prepare for climate change, by taking steps such as building roads that are more resistant to extreme temperatures and mitigate flooding.

This is the first regional plan in 10 years, since CMAP's Go to 2040 plan. CMAP is responsible for comprehensive regional planning in Cook, DuPage, Kane, Kendall, Lake, McHenry and Will counties in northeastern Illinois, and determines which projects are eligible for federal funding. CMAP gathered input for the plan, which was three years in the making, from more than 100,000 residents.

At Wednesday's launch event, Mayor Rahm Emanuel, Cook County Board President and mayoral candidate Toni Preckwinkle and DuPage County Chair Daniel Cronin all stressed the need for the state legislature and governor to pass an infrastructure bill to help pay for roads, bridges, rail cars and other transportation needs. There has not been such a bill since 2009, and by 2050 \$24 billion will be needed simply to maintain, operate and administer the transportation system as it is today, the report found.

Emanuel encouraged the crowd of about 1,000 elected leaders, transit agency heads and planners to put pressure on the legislature to pass a bill by May, or else the region should figure out a way to fund construction needs on its own.

"Springfield, let's wake up and get to work..." Emanuel said. "If you're not going to do it, we're ready to do it on behalf of the people we represent."

Szabo said that while CMAP has no legislative authority, it does act as a "convenor," and it is possible for regional leaders to figure out a way to raise fees within the region, to be used for regional needs.

"If the federal government and the state government continue to fail us, then we have a responsibility to seize our own future," Szabo said.

But Laurence Msall, president of The Civic Federation, a fiscal watchdog group, said that the Chicago region's transportation program must be supported through a broad-based tax, like an increase in the gas tax, supported by the state legislature.

"We generate and send more tax dollars down to Springfield than we get back," Msall said.

In its plan, CMAP recommends broadening sales tax collections to include more services. The sales tax is a source of local funding that has been hit hard by residents shopping online instead of in bricks-and-mortar stores. The sales tax shortfall was one reason all three transit agencies raised fares this year.

Also in the report are a list of highway projects and transit projects deemed eligible for federal funding, which have already been reported in early drafts.

Eligible projects include construction of the Elgin O'Hare Western Access project, which will build new highway access to O'Hare International Airport; completion of Jane Byrne Interchange reconstruction; expansion of Interstate 55 (the Stevenson Expressway), and Interstate 80; and reconstruction of Interstate 290 (the Eisenhower Expressway).

The plan also supports the rebuilding and addition of a "flex lane" along portions of the Central Tri-State Tollway (Interstate 294). A flex lane would allow express bus service.

Besides the Red Line extension, included among transit projects eligible for federal funding are reconstruction of the Forest Park branch of the CTA Blue Line and North Red/Purple Line modernization.

The plan also supports bus rapid transit projects and improvements on the Metra BNSF; Milwaukee West; Union Pacific North, Northwest, and West; and Rock Island District lines. CMAP recommends that about 60 percent of federal funding go to transit projects and 40 percent to roads — the same proportion recommended in Go to 2040.

The Active Transportation Alliance, which advocates for walking, biking and transit, criticized the report as overly "car-centric." Alliance Executive Director Ron Burke said that nearly all transportation spending by suburbs and counties in the region is for road projects to move cars.

"As a result, even when CMAP plans call for alternatives to driving, these ideas take a back seat to road projects that lead to more driving and compete with alternatives," said Burke. He pointed to the multibillion dollar plans to expand I-55 and I-290.

mwisniewski@chicagotribune.com

Twitter *[@marywizchicago](https://twitter.com/marywizchicago)*